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ABSTRACT

Television advertising should be used for second language instruction for several reasons: availability; common features across cultures (i.e., familiarity); intrinsic, intentional didactic quality; convenient length; entertainment value and likelihood of student response; and the range of proficiency levels to which it can be adapted. A variety of approaches to analyzing commercials can be adopted, including content analysis, various forms of linguistic analysis, examination of the interplay of different codes (images and sounds), and semiotic analysis. Some basic composition rules can be used to compose commercials as a class activity. Five styles of advertising, each with a distinctive discourse type and communicative pattern, have evolved as the genre has developed and can be adapted for use in the classroom study of television commercials. (MSE)

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THE 'GRAMMAR' OF TV PUBLICITY

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THE "GRAMMAR" OF TV PUBLICITY

I. Publicity in the classroom

Publicity has its supporters and its detractors: the former maintain that it is a new form of popular art, while the latter dismiss it as a sort of huge dust-bin where all the rags and tatters of media culture are sooner or later to be found.

Without entering this order of evaluations we think that advertising may well be one of our educational concerns on account of its pervasive influence on other forms of discourse in social communications . It is an ever-changing "genre" which can rightfully find its place within a multi-media syllabus in the teaching of foreign languages.

In this poaper I will rapidly go through a number of good reasons for adoptintg TV advertising as didactic material. I will then suggest some possible analytical approaches starting from the consideration of the verbal message in terms of speech acts and communicative patterns, then taking into account the complex dynamics of the various codes converging in the message. Besides, some basic compositive rules will be given in order that commercials might be composed as class activity: to this aim , a diacronic grid highlighting the main developments within the "genre" may be useful, and it will be given at the end of the article.

The first good reason for adopting TV advertising as didactic material is its present availability: from satellite TV British and American spots can be easily recorded , re-arranged and edited to be Video-reproduced in the class-room.

Another reason is that pupils can be assumed to possess a long and regular experience, amounting to a special competence, of a "genre" which has largely common features across cultures (even if retaining culture-specific features whichmay be analysed as such).

TV advertising, as advertising in general, is intrinsecally didactic, intended to be so and built to this aim: every detail, either in the verbal or in the visual code is there to carry some information, convey some meaning and arouse some emotion. Besides, every spot is a nice and neat didactic unit, very entertaining and pleasant as a rule, easily borne by the laziest pupils and quite as easily bound to elicit a response from every one of them.

TV commercials lend themselves to different levels of reading and to different kinds of activity and exploitation and can thus be used for pupils or students at different levels of proficiency.

I.I. Content analysis

One of the first forms of approach to TV advertising may be suggested by "content analysis". Pupils may group commercials on a thematic and frequency basis: how many spots per day for how many products; which products are more frequently advertised and at what timesof day, in connection with what particular programmes and aimed at what special audience(s). Graphs can be drawn out and compared on the basis of some variables: what "special world" is commonly associated with what product, and what "model of consumption" : foodstuffs, for instance are commonly associated with the provident woman-in-the-kitchen, or the happy-family at meal times around the kitchen table (or is it the dining-room table?). Beer and drinks in general tend to be associated with sociable occasions, in a genial mode of consumption, whereas tobacco -in the British tradition- usually comes together with a relaxed

undisturbed male solitude in the peace of nature. Banks and Insurance Companies draw upon our hidden fears and worries, whereas cosmetics and cars make use of messages wich play upon flattering projections of ourselves in a world of social success and affluence, aided by personal charme and attractiveness.

I.2. Filling a chart : description of the spot as global text

Together with the general filing of commercials in accordance with merceological and content criteria allowing a general statistic survey of our corpus, there may come another activity which takes into consideration every commercialin its component elements and codes. The example which is given below may suggest a descriptive chart to be filled in all or some of its parts:

Product : sliced meat
Name: Mattesons
Characters : a happy family of four
Setting : the kitchen and the kitchen table
Action : a provident housewife serves sliced meat to the utmost satisfaction of her happy family: husband boy and girl. Often only two metonimic hands are to be seen, in the close-up shot of table, dish, knife and fork, product.
Verbal text: the words of a song, sung by a shrill female voice, with the "family chorus" for the Mmmm!

Chicken or ham do't take long (Mmm)
Garlic sausage meat, eat'em (Mmm)
You can make them special, bake'em, grill or fry'em (Mmm)
Just try them! Eat'em, you can't beat'em (Mmm)
Mattesons make them and there's no doubt
All the Mmm is in there. You bring it out!

Slogan : (male voice off) Just try and say Mattesons, without saying Mmmm!
Super Say Mattesons without saying Mmm!

To the items of the chart some others may be added accounting for the intercodal aspect of the text:

Music track: a very simple jingle with a heavy beat signalling both the rhythm of the verbal and the cutting of the visual track

Redundance: the degree of convergence among words and sounds , words and images on the screen

Kind of appeal: rational, emotional, esthetic, or, as is common for foodstuffs, 'polysensual', that is affecting our imagination of...edibles, drinkables, smellables etc.

Underlying value(s): in our example good taste, quick varied preparation, nourishing healthy choice, in a context (and here comes another set of supporting general values) of family affections and care-taking provident female activity.

Underlying general values are always existent in TV advertising, which commonly stresses some non-controversial references as health, nature, efficiency and effectiveness, science and technology, success

and glamour, prestige and performance, family and tradition, peer group and innovation, travel and adventure and so on, in an alternation of modes and models where nothing seems to really be exclusive of anything else, but where some constant elements are to be found, eminently the ideology of consumption as an undisputable value. Even some culture-specific aspects can be found which may constitute the 'focus' of some special attention:'small behaviours' like ways of greeting, gestures, postures and expressions, all aspects which cannot be entered here.

2.Linguistic analysis: describing the spot as verbal text

Since the language may be the focus of our purpose , we may concentrate on the verbal track , on macro- and micro-acts and on the other specific rhetorical elements which make up the 'diversity' of advertising language.

2.1. Speech-acts and sub-genres

If in the example given in I.2. the macro-speech act could be defined as extended appeal, complete with its 'ground', other acts occur in TV advertising, ranging from simple to complex, immediate and elaborately indirect. In no way intending to exhaust the range of possibilities in this field, I will list some of the most common acts to be found in TV advertising texts. One of the simplest is

- self-presentation: when the product on the screen speaks for itself through an 'ontologic image' as Péninou puts it and the verbal code has simply to redund on the image which already carries every item of information (Ex.: Lynx , Body Spray for Man)
Sometimes the verbal is concentrated in a slogan which stresses the hyperbolic features of the product in the characteristic inflated language of the "genre"(Ex.:Martini Rosso, the right One. Or: Cadbury Chocolate, the one and only). On other occasions we find such acts as

- announcement, when the product is signalled by a voice off communicating directly to the audience (Ex.: The new Argos Catalogue is out now!) where the verbal indicators may be found in such terms as new,now or equivalent forms;

- invitation : together with the appeal it has to be considered as a typical act for the message of advertising; its characteristic feature is that it commonly admits some I/WE and some HERE/THERE as the deictic forms which act as its markers, as in the examples : Come and have a look at the New Holiday sales , in Stuart Marsh! Or: Come on over tonight, we are having a wimpy, etc. Or elliptically: The season's Special Sales in the Covent Garden Archade!

- suggestion :it may be considered as different from invitation and appeal since it comes in a particularly cautious indirect way: Why don't you have a look at your children's shoes? May be Clark's the answer! Or elliptically: Dry hair? Why not try Briar Rose hair conditioner?

- special offer: again a typical advertising act, where the 'special'feature is the condition on which the offer is being made: If you buy a Fagor washing machine, Ariel will give you 10 packs of Ariel Automatic.
Another form of common 'offer' in advertising occurs when the need(or want, or wish) becomes contextualized as a presupposition, or, in simpler words, is given for granted in discourse and provides the 'ground' for the offer proper:
When you need to make perfect pickles, Sarson's the answer (ground: there is a moment in which you need...)
To make your hair look smooth and clean, Johnson's shampoo (ground: you want to make your hair look ...)

There are other more complex texts which need to be analyzed inside other more complex categories, and this takes us to consider another character of TV advertising: its intertextual practices, the continuous mimicking of other TV "genres" , since pillage and imitation, mimicry and appropriation are inherent in the nature of advertising, which has to heavily rely on the "already known" as a prop for the unknown , that is to say for the message of the product.

Among the TV genres which lend themselves to be appropriated by TV advertising I will list only the most common, which I will call sub-genres of advertising.

Each of them can be analyzed in accordance with its typical features, cut into smaller parts , acts etc. Among the most common TV advertising sub-genres there can be found:

the interview to or by an expert who recommends the advantages of the product. He/she may be a "real" expert or just an empirical expert, as happens in the notorious example of the two women discussing the "whiteness" of their respective washes.

the testimonial , or a "monologue" by some expert or by some notorious character (sometimes from another TV programme) who humourously mimics his/her parallel role in this new context and function.

the report, imitating the realistic mode of the direct comment released by someone who is or has been sent to a far-off country. A very common device for "exotic" drinks, travel agencies and the like.

the playlet: usually a short scene of family or neighbourhood life after the modes of the soap-opera, the "series", the "serial" or other similar forms.

the film: a short scene "after the fashion of" a director, a particular film or a movie genre, like the western, SF, horror, love story etc.

the Video-music clip which also provides the technique for a large number of commercials nowadays, mostly addressed to young audiences in connection with certain products as soft drinks, crisps, chocolate bars,etc.

Incidentally, the Video-music technique provides a good example of how verbal communication, in TV advertising, can be made irrelevant and communication in general can be restricted to a very scant number of elements: sometimes the music beat, and the cutting of the visual track in accordance, are enough to alert,so to say, a special audience to a message addressed to them. Not much more is needed , just the product brand name and image, which, in turn, may simply consist of a grapheme or even an alphabet letter, like the W on the back pocket of someone's jeans , to signal WRANGLERS. All this, according to me, comes from the flash-light technique of the Video-music clip, where you can see so much "in the blink of an eye".

This short survey of the most common sub-genres within the genre, and quick list of the principal types of speech-acts in TV advertising discourse may provide some analytical instruments for macro-and micro-textual analyses which assume the verbal code as the starting point, without discarding the complexity of the whole message. But another approach can be suggested, which focuses on the inter-medial play of sounds and music, images and words.

3. A pluricodic reading of the spot: the retrieval of the story-board

A critical viewing of TV advertising would not be complete without some attention being paid to the inter-codic play at work in the message.

Images, words and sounds may in fact redund on one another, and this happens when the iconic codes, that is images and sounds, tend to "show" and illustrate what the words "say". The redundance or convergence can never be complete since some codes can "do" something which the others can't (words, for instance, can affirm and deny, question, modalize, shade the meaning in such complex ways as images can very rarely do; on the other hand the diegetic power of images is immense: "place two images one after the other, said Méliés , and they will tell a story"). The convergence of the different codes may be partial, when their respective discourses correspond to one another at intervals; there may be diverging codic trends when words, images and sounds tend to perform different functions and go along different directions. TV has accustomed our perceptive faculties to easily follow two or more different lines of stimuli, provided each one of them has some internal coherence and has been fairly automatized.

In turn the different codes may take the lead in conveying the information and carrying out the persuasive appeal. Sometimes it is mainly words which take care both of the informative and the persuasive functions (very difficult to be disintangled from each other!). Some other times the thread of discourse and the appeal are provided by the suggestive story-telling of images; at some other times the connective force and the appeal of the message are entrusted to the sound track and to the rhythm of the jingle.

In order to visualize the contemporary working of the the different codes, the retrieval of the story-board (the presumable palympsest upon which copy-writers and visualizers worked when first the commercial was stetched out) may provide a useful exercice.

An example of story-board:

Visual track Plans I, 2 and 3	Description of visual	Verbal text	Music track
	A girl is getting ready for the ball	Voice-in, female: "Falling in love was pretty easy..."	Incidental music
	At the ball. She is dancing with a boy. He gives her a ring.	Voice off, same: "But now I know that our love is going to last".	Ball-room music
	The two are seen from behind, going towards a bright horizon	Voice off, male: "A diamond is forever"	Classic music (emphatic)

SUPER : A diamond is forever

The above example is very simple: it has actually been simplified for the present purpose.
Story-boards may reach considerable levels of complexity, and their retrieval may provide a useful activity and, as a result, may give you a clear synopsis of the working of the different codes performing different complementary functions at the same time.

The composition of original story-boards for hypothetical commercials may be the next step for our class of young "creatives". Students usually enjoy the activity, even though they tend to be content with hurried superficial 'brilliant' results, too soon too easily reached. Attetion and reflection must be called to what they intend to do and to what aim, addressing who, emphasizing what, implying what else. TV commercial creation may be a very good exercice at encoding "implied" meanings, suggesting without openly saying, hinting , compacting and conniving with one's addressee.

To this aim, some compositive rules may be given and some examples examined, following the semiotic path which cannot be evaded when dealing with this genre.

4. Semiotic analysis : some basic compositive rules in the "grammar"of TV advertising

Recalling some of the main compositive rules in the grammar of TV advertising may help our class's creative activity making it a conscious process and a sequence of critical selective operations.

Only through the acquisition of this conscious competence, imagination can take the flight and a complex educational aim can be reached.

The main rule can be expressed in this way:

- in advertising the product cannot be represented as an object of daily use or consumption, but it has to be 'hit by sense'(Barthes), assume a special image and some extra-value, be surrounded by a special halo, undergo a metaphorical translation and be transposed inside a 'second system of reference' (as semi oticians call it), different from the first system of reference , which is the literal, denotative meaning of signs.

- anything can be exploited in the construction of this second system of reference , provided it is able to join the need and the wish, the object and its idealized meaning , or at least, anything which exists in the presumed common knowledge or encyclopedia of our perspective viewers.

In the example which has been given in the previous page, an object like a 'diamond' has been associated with a second system of reference -eternal love- which provides a resistant myth in our culture.

From that second system of reference some extra-value is poured upon an object already possessing some financial value of its own. The object, in turn, sheds value upon the system which has been evoked, according to a 'semiotic exchange of value' which is the basis of the suggestive appeal of advertising.

Sometimes, as from the example already cited, the exchange takes place between the object and the feeling. In other cases the exchange takes place between the object and the stereotyped 'world' of the product :

Come to where the flavour is. Come to the Marlboro country

In other examples product and user are strictly associated and the image of the first is the mirror image of the latter and viceversa, in a play of reciprocal confirmation as to such values as taste, style, personality, social status, prestige, success etc.:

This is the car for the man you are: Volvo, dedicated to a few

In the two latest examples the image of the ideal user, in fact, is also clearly evoked in the message: the rugged solitary cow-boy on the one-side, and the successful affluent worldly young man on the other, amounting to two different coexisting male stereotypes.

In order to start this circular dynamics in which the product is given and gives value and meaning to its user, advertising texts usually work upon three different levels of meaning , which will be illustrated by some examples in the following paragraphs.

In the process, the two systems of reference, of which something was said before, are bound to emerge, together with different semiotic subjects in the message.

Example I: a spot for a woman's scent , whose brand name is BRIAR ROSE

In the first plan some objects appear in an undefined bare setting (the cosmetics' limbo, as from the jargon of the trade): a bottle of perfume with its clearly readable label and name, together with a bunch of roses.

The correspondence between the product name and the flowers is evident. A man's hand appears, takes up the bottle and hands it over into a metonimic female hand.

The description I have given so far -referential, objective, denotative - renders, in fact the literal or denotative level of meaning of the message. But I know, from my general knowledge of the world that in Western culture roses symbolize love: a set symbol has thus been inserted through the physical presence of the bunch of roses (redunding in the name of the product), which at once gives sense to the images, the words -the brand name- and the gesture: the gift has been exchanged and the symbolic presence of roses assures that it is a love gift. With our interpretation we contribute to the formation of the message

in accordance with this metaphorical translation into a second level of meaning, which will be called the connotative level . The voice off and the Super, to be heard and seen at the same time, say:

Send your sweet-scented message: Briar Rose

The semiotic subject, the YOU which is being built in the message, is a male presence -the gift giver- paralleled by a shadier female presence -the gift recipient-. The set symbol of roses, the gesture, the two traditional male/female roles in this outdated spot place the connotative meaning of the message within a larger system of values in the culture, precisely what Barthes called 'a mythology'.

"When a number of elements are assembled in a coherent system of values, they constitute a mythology within a culture". Mythology can then provide a third level of meaning in the message, built upon a coherent second system of reference .

The mythology being drawn out in our example has to do with traditional love and the love homage. But mythologies are manyfold and changeable, and so are the semiotic subjects which may be built within the message, as will be seen from the other examples.

ExampleII : the loving couple are dancing in a bluish atmosphere. The girl looks straight into the camera (it is the device through which the phatic function is being accomplished). It's a knowing look coming with a faint smile, while a female voice off says softly:

Discover how much whispers can say...

While the bottle of scent (WHISPERS) is soon to be seen in the next plan, while the Super goes like that:

Whispers, tonight...

Again another feminine scent; the hint at a story in the deictic 'tonight' of the verbal message and in the sequence of images. Again the product is being translated into a symbol, different from the courtly homage of the first example: here the product has been transformed into the magic object, the talisman capable of bringing about lucky events.

Predictably, another semiotic subject is now being evoked: YOU points here to a female presence, both on the addressing and on the receiving side. The mythology is the female-to-female accomplicity in finding the instruments of seduction. Different communicative poles in the message, and an altogether different mythology, which has to do with the ancient cultural value of the 'inarrestable feminine seduction'.

But cultural models change, roles are displaced and so are the accompanying views about roles. Social change and the influence of the media upon social change are too varied and complex phenomena to be more than hinted at here. Advertising is a sort of semiotic sponge, quick in absorbing the first auras, sometimes anticipating messages which will soon be common stock.

Changing market objects and purposes contribute to the change in taste and habits, in a circular process.

Men have to be drawn into the cosmetics industry, for example, and be convinced to use not only the traditional 'manly'essence but the whole 'line' of products. The virile image of the suntanned sportsman has to be somewhat changed but not reversed.

A rhetorical figure is available which might convey an image both hard and soft, to act as the carrier of a changing cultural model: the oximoron , both verbal and visual, the composite significant containing opposite traits lends itself to this purpose.

The sun-tanned muscular young man smelling a bunch of flowers ,with something (just a bit) nasty about him is a visual oximoron for the perfume Arrogance ("How can you win in life without some Arrogance?").

Another (verbal) oximoron is in the phrase:

Dakkar Noir: where gentle strength triumphs

where contrasting semantic elements (gentle/strength) are combined together. Again a two-way sense is being conveyed, according to a sort of as-you-like-it logic.

Through the adoption of this new symbol, advertising also acts as a powerful mediator of ancient and new models, sanctioning both tradition and innovation, drawing upon ancient and new myths which are, all of them, strictly connected with culture and society.

But an objection may be raised which needs being answered. The examples have been drawn from the cosmetic sector which has some special suggestive characters of its own, like a genre within the genre.

But in Tv advertising we see splendid innovative styles together with despairingly outdated ones, like the never ending discussion upon whose wash is whiter, and the like. How can we account for such differences and such coexisting modes? Where are we to place a traditional commercial where an anonymous voice off illustrates the advantages of a toilet cleaning product with these words:

New Frish, the thick liquid lavatory cleaner is now more effective than ever.
Still directable right under the rim.
But New Frish is thicker, now New Frish clings longer.
It helps cleaning stains, killing germs.
Longer lasting freshness with New Frish
(Voice ans Super) New Frish, freshness which says cleanness

This text takes us back to patterns common in radio times, when the text was supposed to be read and had to carry phonic values, repetitions , allitteration and rhyme.

The text had to be a complete self-sufficient unit containing all the parts of the 'grammar' of printed and radio bradcast advertising: the claim(or the slightly boastful hyperbolic definition of the product), the benefit(reference to the advantages of the product), the plus (some extra-qualities possessed by the product in comparison with its competitors), the promise (as to some happy effects the use of the product will bring about).

This special mode of presentation is still to be found in TV advertising where'archaic' models coexist with recent ones, owing to the comparative youth of the genre, since it is not to be forgotten that the first commercials appeared on British TV in I955.

TV advertising sums up, at present, all the models of advertising in general, from the very first appeared in the printed form (the magazine photo of printed advert ising is still evolving into more and more refined shapes), through radio times on to the early television forms, and on to the most recent developments, drawing on the resources of a medium which lends itself to a number of different uses (and abuses).

In order to understand the reasons for this large variety of models within the genre, a diacrinic grid has been drawn out which takes care of the main developments which took place in advertising in general, irrespective of the various channels involved (with the possible exception of n.5).

The first column of the table takes into account the theoretical background of research which founded the different 'styles' in time, starting from the press publicity of the first decades of the century. In the second and third column the different diecourse types and communicative patterns are considered, in relation to the corresponding modes of perception and intended effects.

The diacronic table :

	Dominant value and theory	Discourse model and communicative pattern	Perceptive register and effect
I.	Rationality of needs (economic theory)	Information, description, argument, appeal, (testimonial, interview, dialogue with expert)	Reasonable cognition and assent
2.	Deep motivation (Psychology, motivation theory)	Sketch of a projective model for the user (playlet, analogical situation)	Association and identification
3.	Semiotics and linguistics	Symbolic representation of products through 2nd systems of reference	Decodification of signs and symbols Consent upon symbol value
4.	Fiction (Intertextuality with other TV 'genres'; pastiche, parody of them)	Narrative structures from the original genres (film, sit-com, soap opera, gag, musical, Video-music, publicity)	Recognition and entertainment at recognition. Cooperation to text construction and completion
5.	Seriality	Musical palimpsests filled with images and words (in song)	Synergy, synestesy

The first style obeys the early tenets of classic economic theory, according to which advertising had to properly inform and moderately press upon the public in order to convince them to purchase certain products.

The second develops after the application of 'motivation theories' to advertising. The user or consumer has to be staged with his deep needs and wishes, and the viewer may be induced to identify himself with the image on screen.

The third style ows much to the large number of semiotic studies which started in the

I960's. Semiotic tools of analysis were put to good use in the invention of a subtle and clever type of publicity: elliptical suggestive commercials were made and 2nd systems of reference were cleverly worked upon .Often the very criticism of commentators was exploited, since "detractors are important to publicity as censorship is to publishers and teetotallers to brewers"(McLuhan). A powerful system of values, myths and mythologies came to light, among which some of the most resistant are still with us, like nature, health, leisure, science and technology, and so on.

The fourth style is connected with the mimetic parasitic nature of advertising in general and o TV advertising in particular. It seems to be in the character of TV as medium that evry genre is bound to affect and be affected by all the others, and this may be due to the TV'flow' which quite easily generates a sense of continuity and contiguity among the various programmes.

It is easy to identify genres which are being mimicked in TV commercials,(films, news, soap opera, talk-shows, publicity itself in a game of self-referentiality). It would be almost as interesting to study the effect of publicity on other types of discourse -e.g. political discourse- but this cannot be done here.

In the fifth style the dominant value has been identified as seriality.

By this definition I intend to refer to the common practice of adopting a certain pattern (often a musical pattern) and repeat it through endless variations.

The prototype of this style may be found in the CocaCola spots, where arond a leading code represented by a heavy musical beat, images and words are cut and paced. The commercial is commonly renovated every year , varied a little bit, given some national connotation and still remaining basically the same. Variations upon a fixed theme or a fixed palimpsest is coming up as one of the specific new models of Tv publicity, since the appeal of the Theme plus Variations game is very entertaining, as the glorious series of "Hamlet cigars", or "Carling Black Label" may prove.

The perceptive register seems to be a half-rational response to rhythm, colours , moving images pulsating together: it may be defined, in fact, as synestesy, or a complex response to multi-sensual stimuli, and synergy, or cooperation in a field of dynamic forces.

The appeal of this last style may be very strong, aided by special cinema effects, breath-taking amera angles , distorted shooting perspectives.

According to some psychologists (N.Postman for all), a new type of 'paranormal cognition'may be developed through such techniques, whose effects should be taken into account and reflected upon by psychologists and teachers. But this would open an altogether new order of considerations.

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